

Sri Lanka: Election only after a new Constitution - IUSF

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Interview with IUSF Convener Wasantha Mudalige

For the first time in the history, Inter-university Student Federation (IUSF) appears in a different light in the eyes of most of the masses. The prime reason behind this is the contribution rendered by the IUSF to make the “Aragalaya” a success.

Sri Lankans, irrespective of race, religion, or social class, collectively protested against the worst economic crisis exacerbated by the Rajapaksa regime. Citizens deprived of basic necessities - including food, fuel and medicine took to the streets to voice dissent against the government.

These dispersed demonstrations came together on April 9 in the Galle Face Green area around the Presidential Secretariat, growing and evolving into Sri Lanka’s most organised protest movement, now known as the Aragalaya—the Struggle of the People. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa announced his resignation on July 14 after fleeing from the growing pressure of the Aragalaya, which had already lasted over 100 days.

For over three months, the IUSF has been playing a critical role in the Aragalaya. In that background, Daily Mirror sat with the IUSF convener Wasantha Mudalige to discuss the future direction of the protests amidst Ranil Wickremesinghe’s swearing-in as the eighth executive president.

Meanwhile the Colombo Fort Magistrate’s court on Monday (25) issued an overseas travel ban for six activists including the IUSF Convener Wasantha Mudalige.

What are the prime aims of your organisation?

When the Inter University Students Federation began in 1978, there were three main organisation goals, and those haven’t changed for us. The first is unconditionally standing up for the rights of the people of this country, the second is fighting for the right to free education, and the third is intervention in educational affairs and student welfare of universities. The Inter-University student Federation is built on these aspirations. Therefore, IUSF is an organisation that intervenes in securing the education rights of this country’s citizens and also plays a significant role in finding solutions for the burning issues in this country.

Some critics say you should confine your activities to university issues without poking your fingers into other national issues. What’s your comment?

Free education means that we get this education for free. We get free uniforms, free books, and even the Mahapola scholarship. However, for free education to continue and expand, all citizens suffer greatly and pay taxes. Fishermen in this country pay taxes risking their lives in the deep sea, tea plantation workers pay taxes, and farmers toil daily and pay taxes. Therefore, we believe there is

no way to ignore the problems of such a society, including people who hardly pay their taxes. Therefore, we believe that we should intervene in the issues of the people of this country.

Some say that your activities actually hinder university education and that you force students to join your campaigns. What's your comment?

Since the establishment of this organisation, numerous battles have been won, and rights have been protected. 1981 "DawalaPathrikawa" was carried out by the Sri Lanka government to reduce provisions for education. It was with the leadership of the Inter-University Student' Federation, the Sri Lanka parliament was surrounded by university students in protest of the government's actions. The government tried suppressing that campaign with the army. But the courage and strength of the Sri Lankan students' movement defeated it and forced the government to cancel "DawalaPathrikawa".

Then North Colombo Medical College (NCMC), a private university in 1980, is now nationalised and affiliated with the University of Kelaniya as the Ragama Medical Faculty as a result of our struggles. In addition, the fraudulent SAIM was abolished with the intervention of the IUSF only. IUSF was decisively involved in all these fights to secure and guarantee free education in this country. Anyhow, none of the students were forced into these protests; university students voluntarily engage in these protests as they are aware of their responsibilities as citizens of this country.

On the other hand, it is true that while engaging in these social activities, each one of us has to make sacrifices. In some instances, two or three hours of lectures will be missed while they participate in protests, but it happens of their own free will. I assure none of the students are forced into participating in protests.

Are you still opposed to private universities?

Obviously, we as the IUSF only believe in accessible education, and we, as an organisation, have shed blood and tears on behalf of that. Under all circumstances, we stand with our slogan of free education. There cannot be a difference between haves and have-nots; we also believe in gender equality. Based on these, we fight for free education.

Don't you think private universities give opportunities to students who otherwise cannot enter university and also save foreign exchange?

Let's talk about foreign exchange, we are the pearl of the Indian ocean; the sea surrounds us. But starting from the Halibut Sri Lanka needs, other essential fish are brought from abroad. How much of Sri Lankan money will go abroad from that? Many essential goods are brought to Sri Lanka from abroad. The government only wants forex from education, a long-established and well-known argument that the government puts forward to cover up their incompetence. Thus, selling education is not the answer for forex; it will only lead to the collapse of our education system.

In any case, now that you are firmly part of the Aragalaya, what do you aim to achieve through it?

Aragalaya is and will be a critical struggle for the people. There was a continuous struggle on the part of school students, farmers and university students. Extending from that, there were numerous issues on the part of the private and public sector employees, who had their demands. So, as a result, all the sectors of the society came to a juncture demanding the resignation of former president Gotabaya Rajapaksa. So, within this struggle, we, as the IUSF, intervened to our maximum capacity, and all possible measures were taken from our side. We stood in the same line with the

people of this country.

We did the necessary intervention to convince the people of this country that they could fight and win and then win again. Unfortunately, during the past few months, we saw parents abandoning their children or murdering them out of despair and even people dying, standing for days in interminable queues. We know that this is not what people aspire to as a society and as Sri Lankans. We need a society that enjoys life and a secure future for everyone. We are working as stakeholders to realise that future. We are part of this fight and will always be intervening and lending our strength to the struggle.

What, in your opinion, are the solutions to the present crisis?

This crisis is very intense and decisive. Ranil Wickremesinghe was sworn in as the eighth executive president. It is a testament to people's opinions not being represented, seeing the opinion of the people is not in the parliament. The people of this country kicked out the president, who obtained 6.9 million votes two years ago. With the swearing-in of Ranil Wickremesinghe, the people's opinion has been discarded like a worthless piece of garbage. This is an easy shortcut taken by the Pohottuwa MPs to perpetuate their corrupted and fraudulent lives.

Can Wickremesinghe eliminate fuel, gas and milk powder queues? Clearly not. Even after Ranil Wickremesinghe became Prime Minister, he reiterated the depth of this crisis. About how people should tighten their belts, about how making a living is going to get more difficult.

The only solution is an interim government. There is a huge expectation gap between the masses and the government; to eliminate that, a people's assembly must be established. We need to create a system to connect people to the central governance system within an interim structure. Within the establishment of the People's Assembly, a People's Council should be established. Within that structure, with the collaboration of the government and people's council, solutions must be found.

Moreover, the constitution should be urgently reformed, and discussions should be held to bring a new constitution. In addition, ill-gotten wealth must be recovered within the framework of the legal system.

Some say this is an economic crisis, while others say it is political.

This is clearly a combination of economic and political crises.

This is not just an economic crisis but also not only a political crisis. Rather a political crisis that was clearly caused by the economic crisis. Obviously, therefore the answer to this is political. First, Ranil Wickremesinghe must resign from his presidency as he does not hold the majority opinion. The people of this country did not give a mandate to Ranil Wickremesinghe in the 2020 election. As the voice of the masses that defeated Gotabaya Rajapaksa, IUSF strongly believes that Ranil Wickremesinghe's fate will be the same. After that, an interim government should be formed in accordance with the constitution. The interim government should create an environment where the "strugglers" and social activists of this country can intervene and influence the governing system. Then within that environment, quick constitutional reforms and economic reforms could be done. After that, we should go for an election only after a new constitution has been adopted. No matter who is appointed, this cannot be done without doing the aforementioned.

What do you propose? A presidential or a parliamentary election?

We believe that if we are going for an election, we should hold an election only after adopting a new constitution. We need to change this system and go for elections. The executive presidency should

be abolished. If we don't hold an election with these progressive changes, we think the people will not achieve a satisfactory and sufficient victory in their struggles. The same set of goons will end up acquiring power. Definitely, an election must be held to examine the will of the people but only after formulating the necessary foundation for that.

The Government has kept universities closed for quite some time. Do you see another agenda behind this move?

Of course, there is an agenda behind this. Even during the pandemic, the government closed schools and universities without a proper plan to continue academic work. While all the other systems ran smoothly, the government had no plans to open schools and universities. The government is aware of the resistance from the universities and schools. They want protests against the government to be crushed and trampled; thus, the education institutions are arbitrarily closed.

What are the next steps of the Aragalaya, and will it continue until Ranil Wickremesinghe is ousted?

Ranil Wickremesinghe, who clearly has no public support, came to parliament by pure luck. He is now intervening to protect the Rajapaksa junta dishonouring the "Aragalaya" to the core; he should be expelled immediately as he could not even garner enough votes to secure his seat. We will take all possible measures to drive Ranil Wickremesinghe away. Also, as the student body of Inter-University, we are organising massive protest actions in the future. We emphasise to the people of this country that Ranil Wickremesinghe, who has been the country's prime minister six times, has not been able to take the country even an inch forward. Also, this is Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was the Prime Minister at the time of the greatest heist of the central bank, PM, who was in power during the Easter Attack. We are taking this message from village to village, making villagers aware until society understands that Ranil is not a magician but only a man with no way forward. We believe that it can be done. We will organise protests, awareness campaigns, and conferences to do it.

Who is the next person you think is suitable for taking the presidency? Is it Anura Kumara Dissanyaka?

Say we have x, y, and z as candidates; we do not say that X is better than y or Y is better than. We emphasise again that we don't want a name; we want a method. We believe in a system that can solve the problems of the society and the people of this country, no matter who is elected under that system. We do not believe in individuals.

There are various allegations that IUSF is a political pawn of the Frontline Socialist Party? Is there any truth behind this?

I deny those allegations. Anyone with differing political views can be part of the IUSF. The actions or slogans of the IUSF are decided by its members unanimously after discussions. Therefore, there is no interference from any political party. Only the slogans of the country's people and students are in our organisation.

There are reports on social media that you are wasting people's tax money by failing continuously at exams in the university for years?

I sat for the G.C. E Advanced Level examination from the arts stream and obtained university admission. I have followed a special degree in archaeology at Rajarata University after being accepted. When a man falls dead, it does not require a degree to say that his death is unjust.

Frankly, it does not require any educational qualifications. It needs only humanity. We believe that we should talk about the problems of the country's people. It doesn't matter if they have a degree or not, or if they are white, black or short. The government propagates all these questions to insult us. We ask the government, how many people in the government have degrees?

How many people in the government have sat for the G.C.E. ordinary Level Exam? Has anyone been so keen about finding out how the Rajapaksa children received their degrees in unlawful manners? Therefore, only humanity is needed to stand up for the people of the country.

What if Ranil Wickremesinghe resorts to brute force to quell the Aragalaya like what happened on July 22nd?

Governments always sought repression when struggles broke out in a way that threatened their power. Sometimes court orders were used, and like in the recent incident, protestors were brutally attacked by the tri-forces. If Ranil Wickremesinghe tries it, we will answer his call. When they were inside the President's House, building barriers and disregarding public opinion, the people broke through and took possession of these. The people took over the Prime Minister's office and the Presidential Secretariat to answer the oppression by the government. So, if the Batalanda Ranil Wickremesinghe thinks that he can wield his authority to wipe out Galle Face, we are ready to face him.

Ranil Wickremesinghe, has begun his blood-thirsty game again while trying to put on a show as a democratic leader. Ranil Wickremesinghe can only wipe out the people near the presidential secretariat; he cannot wipe out the cries of the masses. IUSF looks forward to ousting the illegal President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

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